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Part-Timer, Buy a House. Middle-class precarity, sentimentality and learning the meaning of work

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Introduction

Based on an award winning novel by Arikawa Hiro,¹ and billing itself as a ‘new socially conscious home drama for the 21st century’,² the Fuji Television *dorama* (drama) *Furîtâ, ie o kau*. [Part-timer, buy a house], is a ten-part journey (plus a special extended 11th episode) into the world of precarious living, depression and middle class anxiety. Under the tag line ‘Rebuilding the family’ *Furîtâ, ie o kau* initially presents an archetypical nuclear family revolving about a *sararîman* (salaryman, white collar worker) father and *sengyô shufu* (fulltime housewife) mother, a daughter married off to a doctor and a son about to start fulltime work in a good company. This initial equilibrium begins to unravel, however, when the son Seiji quits his job and becomes a part-time worker. Soon after his mother suffers a mental breakdown due to depression, and on learning that this condition has been caused by a protracted bullying campaign by neighbours, Seiji resolves to save the 1,000, 000 yen needed to move house. He does this by working as a labourer, and at the construction site he meets safety officer Chiba Manami, who becomes Seiji’s love interest.

Starring Ninomiya Kazunari, from JPop band Arashi as the part-time worker, *Furîtâ, ie o kau*, proved a big hit with television viewers and critics alike, garnering a formidable 17.1% share of viewers for its Tuesday 21:00 timeslot (*Kayô 9*) on the Fuji Television channel,³ and receiving three Drama Academy Awards: best actor for Ninomiya, best theme song and finally best drama. The popularity of the topos of precarity addressed in this contemporary social drama indicates the high degree of resonance it achieves with its Japanese audience. In this respect, as a narrative

¹ Arikawa, ‘*Furîtâ ie wo kau*,’ 2009.

² ‘*Furîtâ, ie wo kau, sutôri*’[The Story: Part-timer, buy a house].

³ ‘*Dorama shichôritsu*’ [Audience Ratings for drama]. Along with *Getsu 9* (Monday 9), Fuji’s *Kayô 9* (Tuesday 9) is a primetime slot for television drama.

representation of a number of salient social issues that achieved both high ratings and critical praise, *Furîtâ, ie o kau* deserves special attention.

This chapter analyses *Furîtâ, ie o kau* as a mainstream representation of precarious living in Japan's shifting economic landscape. To do so it moves through a number of stages. The first section contextualises the series within the history of television drama, drawing attention in particular to the ways in which television played a role in supplying justificatory arguments for participation in Japan's post-war economic system, or what Boltanski and Chiapello refer to as particular 'spirits of capitalism', by addressing issues of excitement, security and the fairness of particular economic arrangements.⁴ The second section discusses the economic terrain of post-bubble Japan with particular reference to part-time workers, or 'freeters' in order to map out the contending definitions of this social and policy category. Here, it is important to consider how television *dorama* (drama) helped reconcile these contradictions by supplying new sets of justifications for participation in a workforce that is being rapidly casualised.

The third section consists of a narrative analysis of *Furîtâ, ie o kau*. Drawing on recent cultural studies approaches to television *dorama* that employ close textual analysis,⁵ and Gabriella Lukács' work on the ideological content of Japanese *dorama*,⁶ the analysis focuses on the initial production of the protagonist Seiji as a part-time worker, noting the ways in which this category is defined, and paying particular attention to both the causal narrative (why has he become a freeter?) and the normative framing (what does the label connote and who is responsible?). Furthermore, *dorama*, as a form of narrative story telling, moves from one state of equilibrium to another through a process of destabilisation and restabilisation in order to achieve a sense of narrative resolution,⁷ and through analysis of this process it is shown how the series answers another question, namely: what is to be done about the *problem* of freeters? In doing so, the discussion demonstrates how the narrative provides new resources to address questions of excitement, security and fairness in

⁴ Boltanski and Chiapello, 'The New Spirit of Capitalism', 163. Throughout this chapter I use the concept of 'the spirit of capitalism' as set out by Boltanski and Chiapello in their 1999 book and subsequent 2005 article. For two alternative definitions and their application to Japan see Bellah, 'Tokugawa Religion' and Dore, 'Goodwill and the Spirit of Market Capitalism'.

⁵ See for example Freeman and Iwata-Weickgenannt, "'Count What You Have Now.'"

⁶ Lukács, *Scripted Affects, Branded Selves*.

⁷ Todorov, 'The Poetics of Prose'.

the Japanese economy as the protagonist Seiji is reintegrated into the world of fulltime work.

The concluding section of the chapter considers the critical potential of the series. If representations of precarity are to have a critical effect they need to offer people a vocabulary for making sense of their situations that enables critique of the structure of the social, political and economic processes they are embedded in. Thus I finally ask the question of the extent to which *Furîtâ, ie o kau*, as socially conscious *dorama*, provides a vocabulary for such critique.

Television, work and the spirit of capitalism

The Japanese *dorama* format takes in everything from outlandish stories of ultra-rich high-school girls and their butlers, to the fortunes of a young man who would be a career woman's pet, to the story of scientists who develop a perfect android boyfriend. The ten episode format, give or take a special or two, is a mainstay of Japanese television programming that promises to take viewers through twists and turns before leaving the main character and those around him or her, including the audience, a little wiser. The *dorama* format is thus different to soap operas, which last for an indeterminate period of time and contains multiple plot strands that may or may not be related, in that it is for the most part a closed serial narrative telling one story about a closely related group of characters.⁸ *Dorama* are therefore formally teleological, a characteristic compounded by the fact that they are very rarely renewed for a second season. In this sense any equilibrium reached by the final episode is effectively how the world depicted by the *dorama* will remain.

The following discussion provides contextual background on the development of *dorama* for the subsequent analysis of *Furîtâ, ie o kau*. A complete account is beyond the scope of this chapter and has been done elsewhere,⁹ therefore I limit my focus to how television content has resonated with audiences' experience of economic life. To do this I make use of the concept of 'the spirit of capitalism', which will be used to analyse the moral justifications for work developed by *Furîtâ, ie o kau*.

⁸ Allen, 'Making Sense of Soaps', 252.

⁹ For more detailed histories see Chun, "'A Nation of 100 Million Idiots?"; Clements and Tamamuro, *The Dorama Encyclopedia*, .x – xxix; Ivy, 'Formations of Mass Culture'; Lukács, *Scripted Affects, Branded Selves*.

In the 1950s there was considerable friction between the television and cinema, with television known pejoratively as the 'brown screen' in contrast to the 'silver screen' of cinema.¹⁰ Power, in terms of technological, human and infrastructure resources lay with cinema, so the two fledgling television companies, *Nihon Hôso Kyôkai* (NHK) and the commercial *Nippon Terebi* (NTV),¹¹ were reliant on the major cinema production houses for broadcast material. However, the Japan Motion Picture Association, which perceived television as a threat to its status as preeminent entertainment medium, exploited this impuissance by withdrawing broadcast rights for domestically produced films in 1956 and stipulating that their actors could not appear on television without permission.¹² As a result, television networks were initially dependent on imports for America such as *I Love Lucy*, which was first broadcast by NHK in 1957. However, this period of big screen - small screen rivalry and foreign imports also witnessed the birth of the Japanese 'Home Drama', of which *Furîtâ, ie o kau* is a contemporary example. Indeed, by as early as 1953 NTV's *Sunday Diary of My Home* (*Waga Ya no Nichi Yô Nikki*) and NHK's response *Ups and Downs Toward Happiness* (*Kôfuku e no Kifuku*) were telling stories of families negotiating generation differences and, in the case of *Ups and Downs*, struggling to survive in post-war Japan.¹³

While Japanese programming did eventually replace American imports, the American shows of the 1950s and the colour shows of the 1960s depicting (comparatively) rich Americans living in luxury, helped establish the image of an ideal middle class lifestyle that would become the goal of many Japanese.¹⁴ In doing so they provided part of the rationale for participation in Japan's rapidly mobilizing capitalist system. After defeat in WWII, which shattered the value system sustaining the pre-war Japanese polity,¹⁵ a new set of national narratives centering on economic growth started to take hold. This new national commitment, as embodied in policy by Prime Minister Ikeda's (1960 – 1964) income doubling scheme, with its promise of both personal and national enrichment through work, became a core component of

¹⁰ Lukács, *Scripted Affects, Branded Selves*, 32 – 33. See also Clements and Tamamuro, *The Dorama Encyclopedia*, xiii.

¹¹ NHK, the national broadcaster, began broadcasting in 1950. NTV, which is controlled by the Yomiuri Shimbun publishing company, began broadcasting in 1953.

¹² Lukács, *Scripted Affects, Branded Selves*, 32.

¹³ Clements and Tamamuro, *The Dorama Encyclopedia*, xiii.

¹⁴ Ivy, 'Formations of Mass Culture', 249.

¹⁵ Owada, 'In Search of a New National Identity', 235.

Japan's 'spirit of capitalism' in this period.

Boltanski and Chiapello define the 'spirit of capitalism' as the ideology that justifies people's commitment to capitalism, and which renders this commitment attractive. They argue that capitalism is an amoral process of accumulation, which is at face value absurd, both for the wage earners that lose 'ownership of the fruits of their labour' and for the capitalists themselves, who are chained to a never-ending process of accumulation.¹⁶ Economic and political theory produces the abstract basis for capitalist arrangements, but they 'do not impel ordinary persons to take up a particular lifestyle (i.e., a type of profession), nor do they provide people with the argumentative resources that will enable them to cope with the circumstantial denunciations and personal criticism they may have to face'.¹⁷ Therefore participation also needs a set of concrete justifications that address dimensions of personal and social life external to the process of accumulation across three categories: *excitement* (how the system can help people blossom), *security* (both for the participants and for their children) and *fairness*, explaining how any particular manifestation of capitalism is coherent with a sense of justice / how it contributes to the common good. These justifications produce arguments for participation in capitalism through work, defining and making people aware of the issues at stake and offering action models that they will be able to use.¹⁸

During Japan's period of high speed economic growth these three categories were well taken care of: excitement from both personal development through the company and the promise of material wealth;¹⁹ security through the promise of the job for life system, company welfare and the state pension system; and fairness through the sense that all Japanese were part of a rapidly expanding middle class (*sôchûryû ishiki*, general middle-class consciousness).²⁰ Of particular relevance to this discussion, and cutting across all three modes of justification, was the prospect of house ownership. By expanding home ownership through provision of low cost

¹⁶ Boltanski and Chiapello, 'The New Spirit of Capitalism', 163.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid. 164.

¹⁹ See Rohlen's classic study *For Harmony and Strength* for an example of the ways in which personal development through work was articulated in the workplace in 1970s Japan.

²⁰ As Iwama notes, although there was this sense in fact Japan was never one big middle-class society. However for the purposes of this argument it is the sense of fairness as generally accepted by those participating in the economy that is important. See Iwama, *Wakamono no hataraku ishiki ha naze kawatta no ka*, i, and Furuichi Noritoshi, *Zetsubô na Kuni no Kôfuku na Wakamonotachi*, 47 – 52. For a discussion of different societal models of equality in the postwar period see Chiavacci, 'From Class Struggle to General Middle-Class Society'.

mortgages, the Japanese state helped produce the basis for a sense of stability and also the image of an expanding social mainstream of middle-class homeowners. As Hirayama and Ronald argue, the image of the homeowner provided an action model for workers in the Japanese economy:

Since home ownership provided secure homes and an efficient means of asset accumulation, the majority of people oriented themselves around the expectation of eventually becoming homeowners. The aggregated flow of households climbing up the housing ladder towards property ownership attainment generated a clear social direction.²¹

In this sense homeownership was the material manifestation of Japan's spirit of capitalism in the post-war period, promising the excitement of wealth, the stability of asset accumulation and proving the fairness of the system by reference to the ever expanding middle-class. The gendering of Japan's political economy was also based around the home, with the salaryman taking care of the wealth creation required to support the family as economic *daikoku-bashira* (main and usually 'male' breadwinner) and the *sengyōshufu* (fulltime housewife) responsible for home making and childrearing.

From the 1960s onwards television steadily gained audiences, helped in no small part by the jump in television sales triggered by the telecast of the crown prince's wedding in 1959 and the Tokyo Olympics in 1964. Indeed, by the time the Olympics were staged, it was clear that the fears of the cinema industry were well warranted, as television became the primary means of mass entertainment.²² Over this period, and as the income doubling plan propelled the Japanese economy towards rapid economic growth, the content of *doramas* began to shift in order to better reflect the lives of, and thus resonate with, audiences and markets for advertisers. For instance, the families depicted in Home Dramas of the 1950s shifted from those dominated by a strong central male figure, whose presence was now becoming a rarity in actual Japanese families due to the long hours of company life and the ever present possibility of being dispatched to a branch office at a moment's notice (*tanshin funin*), towards stories centered on strong women; a move that not only

²¹ Hirayama and Ronald, 'Baby-boomers, Baby-busters and the Lost Generation', 325.

²² Ivy, 'Formations of Mass Culture', 249.

reflected and justified the gendered division of labour in Japanese society but also reflected the fact that most of the consumers of these dramas were housewives.²³ A similar shift in content occurred in the 1980s and 1990s with the introduction of *Torendi Dorama* (Trendy Drama), when the Japanese economy went through a period of crisis and reconfiguration. It was at this time that the *freeter* emerged as a particular social and policy category and a potential new audience for television *dorama*. The next section will discuss these changes in the structure of the Japanese economy, the development of the *freeter* as a social and policy category, and how television reflected and helped supply a new spirit of capitalism for the era.

Freeters – defining and representing a contested category

The term ‘freeter’ is a combination of the English word ‘free’ and the German ‘Arbeiter’ meaning ‘worker’. It was coined by the information service provider Recruit and first came into use in the late boom years of the bubble economy, referring at the time to young people who intentionally postponed entry into the workforce to pursue personal goals.²⁴ Freeters were thus initially taken as representative of politically informed trends towards freedom of choice in a buoyant economy. However, with the end of the bubble economy in the 1990s, the reality of economic life in Japan started to make this interpretation of freeters untenable. Faced with harsh new economic conditions, corporations tended to favour retention of experienced workers over employing new untested graduates, who instead would be utilised as flexible part-time workers to fill in the gaps in their workforces and could be let go according to the ebb and flow of market conditions.²⁵ This general policy in the 1990s led to an increasingly stagnant job market and the prospect of precarious employment for what later became known as the ‘lost generation’.²⁶

²³ Lukács, *Scripted Affects, Branded Selves*, 36 - 37. According to Lukács this shift in content was the beginning of a feminisation of *dorama* in response to women’s growing power as consumers, who under the division of labour in Japanese political economy were notionally in control of the family budget.

²⁴ Kosugi, ‘Youth Employment and Japan’s Economic Recovery’.

²⁵ Hirayama and Ronald, ‘Baby-boomers, Baby-busters and the Lost Generation’, 329.

²⁶ For a particularly strong denunciation of representations of freeters in this period see Akagi, ‘Maryuama Masao o hippatakitai. 31sai furitā. Kibō wa sensō’. Akagi’s article, in which he denounces the ossified state of the Japanese economy and rhetorically hopes for war that enable social mobility provoked a visceral reaction from critics on the left. See the collection in ‘Ronza’.

This historical development and inherent diversity has left the freeter category as a social identity ambiguous: both someone who has chosen to live outside the corporate world, suggesting agency and choice, but also someone who has no choice but live the part-time life, suggesting an economically disadvantaged underclass and as such deserving of policy intervention. However, Mōri cogently argues that this ambiguity is in fact functionally productive:

...the discursive formation concerning freeters established a certain social ideology in the 1990s. It is an ideology that enables the capitalist industry as a whole to easily incorporate young people into a more flexible and cheaper labour force under post-Fordist economic conditions²⁷

Thus the ambiguous discursive formation acted as a contradiction-smoothing device that rendered demands of post-Fordist labour reasonable through an appeal to agency and choice: the old social contract was changing but this was in fact a good thing because it would liberate young workers from the stifling demands of Japan's job for life system. According to Lukács, television *dorama* played a part in this act of reconciliation, partly through the new *Trendy Dorama* format, which also emerged in the late 1980s, and focused on cool young people imbued with a sense of freedom and personal agency searching for happiness.²⁸ Later through workplace *dorama* such as the wildly popular *Shomuni*,²⁹ in which the main character constantly reminds her colleagues that the old ideology of the company cannot offer employees the sense of stability and belonging it once did, this message of liberation was pushed further.³⁰ In Boltanski and Chiapello's terms, these new *dorama* supplied ways of making sense of work that stressed the freedom that came with flexible employment practices, a liberation that then provided the excitement of movement, change and agency, and with security and fairness coming from the capacities of the individualised, resourceful subject. As Lukács argues of workplace *dorama* in the 1990s:

²⁷ Mōri, 'Culture = Politics', 22-23.

²⁸ Lukács, *Scripted Affects, Branded Selves*, 38.

²⁹ *Shomuni* is a popular comedy TV drama that revolves around Japanese office ladies and achieved a peak rating of 28.5% in its Wednesday evening slot.

³⁰ Lukács, *Scripted Affects, Branded Selves*, 168.

...workplace dramas...tended to naturalize the withdrawal of corporations from guaranteeing stable employment. Instead, workplace dramas encouraged individuals to redefine themselves as enterprising and autonomous subjects who were on their own to secure their psychological or economic well-being.³¹

However, since the 1990s, these 'conscientious rebels' have subsequently been problematised in the light of Japan's ailing welfare system and the myriad anxieties surrounding the dual problem of an aging society and low birthrate.³² Freeters engaged in a precarious life style earn low wages, meaning that many are not able to make social security contributions, and their lack of stability impedes their ability to form the families needed to address Japan's chronic low birth rate.³³ Freeters have thus been targeted by the state as a form of social risk.³⁴ Furthermore, because of their unstable income and uncertain futures, freeters are less likely to be in a position to buy property, a goal that was key to mobilizing the Japanese workforce in the post-war period.³⁵

Thus freeters are not just a risk in terms of their responsibilities to pay into the welfare system and form families, but by not taking on the goal of property ownership, a key justification for hard work in the Japanese economy is negated.³⁶ In this regard, recasting of the category from conscientious objector, to useful in the post-Fordist economy, to problem for, if not burden on, the welfare state, has led to attempts at reintegration into the economy with appeals to their sense of self-responsibility (*jiko senkinin*). Of course self-responsibility is the watchword of neoliberalism, which attempts to define people as individuals competing with each other under market conditions,³⁷ therefore freeters acting on their resources should be able to choose whatever lifestyle suits them best. However, as Hook and Takeda

³¹ Ibid., 173.

³² For a discussion of the challenges presented by the low fertility rate and aging population see Smil, 'The Unprecedented Shift in Japan's Population'.

³³ Forrest and Hirayama, 'The Uneven Impact of Neoliberalism on Housing Opportunities', 1007.

³⁴ Hook and Takeda, "'Self-responsibility' and the Nature of the Postwar Japanese State,' 114 - 119.

³⁵ Hirayama and Ronald, 'Baby-boomers, Baby-busters and the Lost Generation', 399. Hirayama and Ronald note that it is next to impossible for an increasing number of young people in non-regular work to secure a loan, and that the deflationary economy makes repayments heavy.

³⁶ This theme has recently been explored by the architect and artist Sakaguchi Kyōhei, who has made a number of 'Oyen' mobile houses as a method of interrogating the relationship between work, space and housing. See Sakaguchi, *Dokuritsu kokka no tsukurikata* and Cooper, Perkins and Rumford, 'The Vernacularization of Borders,' 24 - 28.

³⁷ Harvey, 'A Brief History of Neoliberalism', 2.

argue, while the Japanese state made liberal use of the concept of self-responsibility in the 2000s, it was always self-responsibility defined within a normative framework set by the economic goals of the state: as those goals changed so to did the implications of self-responsibility.³⁸

As of 2010, when *Furitā, ie o kau* was broadcast, the official definition of freeter is a man or unmarried woman between the ages of 15 and 34 who (1) works part-time, (2) has lost their job and is searching for part-time work or (3) someone who is currently unemployed but wishes to work part-time.³⁹ Numbers falling into this category peaked in 2003 at 2.17 million, dropping to 1.78 million in 2008 then began to rise again. In 2010, freeter numbers stood at 1.83 million. Of that number a slim majority (975,000) were aged between 25 and 34,⁴⁰ reflecting the fact that many became ‘fulltime’ freeters in Japan’s lost decade; the rise in numbers after 2008 correlates with the international financial crisis. Freeters have been further classified into a number of sub-groups by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare: ‘moratorium’ (*moratoriamu-kei*) freeters who have yet to decide on a career; ‘no choice’ (*yamu wo ezu-kei*) freeters who want fulltime employment but cannot find it; and ‘dream chasers’ (*yume tsuikyū-kei*) who work part-time to support themselves as they move towards a particular goal.⁴¹

However, Slater makes the further point that young people who fall into this category could be engaged in anything from highly skilled freelance work, to earning some pocket money, to living a precarious day-to-day existence: ‘...freeter is a term that refers to almost anyone who is out of the once held ideal of permanent and full-time, that is, “regular” in all of its normative connotations’.⁴² There is also the question of class. Japan’s political economy, through its highly competitive schooling system, streams human resources into different categories of work life, equipping students with sets of competencies appropriate for their future work roles. Within this schema, it is middle class youth that notionally have choice: Working class graduates from low ranked secondary schools are for the most part already socialised into a

³⁸ Hook and Takeda, “‘Self-responsibility’ and the Nature of the Postwar Japanese State,” 118.

³⁹ Kosugi, “‘Furitā’ to wa darenanoka’,” 46.

⁴⁰ For details see for example the website of the Wealth, Labour and Welfare Ministry: *Kōsei Rōdōshō*, ‘Wakamono Koyō Kanren Dēta’.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Slater, ‘The Making of Japan’s New Working Class’.

form of precarious employment.⁴³ This then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as non-regular workers are less likely to receive the skills training that would enable social mobility.⁴⁴

Therefore, in contrast to working class youth graduating from low ranked schools, who are expected to move into precarious forms of employment, middleclass freeters, whose traditionally defined career paths produce the expectation of stable fulltime employment and homeownership, have become a subject of societal and political concern. This is an important point to bear in mind when analysing the social representations in *Furîtâ, ie o kau* because in the course of telling its story the series makes use of both middleclass and working class people engaged in precarious employment while also engaging in an argument about the relationship between the two. The following discussion shows how *Furîtâ, ie o kau* produces a new set of justifications for participation in Japanese capitalism by appealing to opportunities for excitement and self growth through creation; security through flexibility and family; and fairness, not through the ever expanding middle class, but a resigned stoicism in the face of an uncertain future. And it is the manual labourer, as new hero of Japanese capitalism, who embodies all these traits.

On being or not being a *freeter*: ambiguous internal definitions

Furîtâ, ie o kau is situated within the discursive production and reproduction of freeter as a social category described above, and the ambiguities discussed manifest in the exposition in the first episode. The series opens with Take Seiji, narrating a story set in the past from his vantage point in the present, describing his ‘so-so’ (*soko soko*) life. Via voice over we learn that he came from a decent family, went to a decent school, then onto a similar university before joining a run of the mill electronic components company. This has been easy for him; life has progressed in a relatively uncomplicated fashion. He is resolutely middleclass, and to this point in his life has been swept along by external forces. But now Seiji is standing with his arms out stretched, wearing the pure white of the initiate at a new employee training camp. He sneezes and the camp trainer scolds him: ‘do telephone poles sneeze?!’ They begin to

⁴³ Ibid. For a representation of these schools in *dorama* see *Asuko Māchi!*, which depicts the integration of a female protagonist into a male dominated technical highschool.

⁴⁴ Kingston, *Contemporary Japan*, 94.

walk around the room; the trainer shouts ‘turtle!’ and the new employees fall to the ground. Seiji is confused but does the same as the rest of his cohort. Finally, to compound the surreal nature of the exercise the trainer shouts ‘Michael Jackson’. After a moment of stunned silence the new employees start to dance.

Soon after this comic opening, one of the very few moments of levity in the entire series, and after a number of attempts at revising company working practices are stymied by his section chief, Seiji quits his job at Yotsuba Electric, and initially Seiji is constructed as a ‘conscientious objector to the life of corporate drones’.⁴⁵ This posits Seiji’s work environment as absurd, only making sense retrospectively after we learn of the training camp instructor’s injunction to ‘never criticise’, which makes Seiji’s decision to leave at least partially reasonable. Therefore, it is not the case that Seiji is at the sharp end of an increasingly precarious mode of employment. As we have been told, he is from a decent background and had a decent job with decent prospects. Instead, Seiji has purposefully, through an act of volition, placed himself in a position of precarity. He is thus morally culpable for his decision, a point he is reminded of relentlessly by his abrasive father at the dinner table,⁴⁶ as well as the unemployment officer at Hello Work.⁴⁷ As we have seen from the discussion above there are two possible interpretations of this move. One is to see Seiji as exercising his agency in a liberalised marketplace by attempting to better his lot. However, this *dorama* is quick to close down this interpretation instead making the point that freeters such as Seiji are in someway personally deficient.

This occurs through a two-stage process. First Seiji attends an interview where he is asked to perform a computing test in a room with other interviewees. As he is taking the test he looks around to see that the other candidates appear confident in their task, whereas Seiji himself is obviously having difficulties. After this test, a dejected Seiji then invites a number of his friends out for a Karaoke session. All of them write back to say that they are unavailable. The reasons they give are all related to their jobs, and in particular the unfair aspects of what is expected of them, both in terms of workload

⁴⁵ Kingston, *Contemporary Japan*, 91.

⁴⁶ According to Freedman, ‘The Homeless Junior High School Student Phenomenon’, 391, meals act as a barometer for measuring the state of a family. This is certainly the case in Freeter. Many of the arguments between Seiji and his father take place at the dinner table and just before Seiji’s mother’s breakdown, at the height of tension with his father over quitting his job, Seiji stops eating with the family altogether. By the end of the series the family is reunited around the dinner table.

⁴⁷ Hello Work is the employment agency of the Ministry of Labor.

and hours. However, what is clear from this quick email exchange is that his friends are working within their respective corporate environments, having accepted the demands placed upon them, whereas Seiji is now situated on the outside of this world. It is significant that Seiji should be contacting his old friends directly after apparently failing the selection test, and that no one is available to spend time with him, as it signifies his (self induced) symbolic and temporal separation from his peers: symbolically in that the rules that structure their life-worlds are different, and temporally due to the fact that Seiji is still at a point in his life where it is possible to take a night off on a whim (something that would be possible as a student but not as a fulltime company employee). This temporal estrangement is further reinforced when Seiji visits his ex-girlfriend, who is now in a relationship with a man wearing a suit, an unambiguous signifier of fulltime work, and has also moved to the next stage in her life.

The second stage of the process comes at a department store where Seiji is working part-time. This scene is key because it acts to finally shift the causal component of Seiji's actions away from corporate structure and towards the psychological makeup of Seiji himself. In a previous scene Seiji's father offered another explanation for the strange training practices at Yotsuba Electronic, that they were designed to sieve out weak employees that have nothing to offer the company. The intentional component of Seiji's joblessness, which he describes to a previous work colleague as opting to 'live the easy life', is dismissed by his father in blunt terms: 'you might think that you chose to leave. But in fact you were weeded out.' Thus, rather than an act of volition, Seiji's position is reframed as a result of his lack of ability. Seiji's father Seiichi, played by a scowling, growling Takenaka Naoto, is an unsympathetic character, and whereas Seiji himself is troubled by this way of explaining his current position, audiences may be less inclined to agree with it. However, the following scenes are structured in a way that lends plausibility to this argument. When a customer at the home goods store asks for a sieve (using the word *furui*) Seiji deals with her impolitely. This leads to a dressing down by his boss, at which point Seiji again quits. Then, as if to reinforce his symbolic isolation from the rest of his peers, as well as Seiji's apparent inability move to the next stage in his life, he goes to Karaoke on his own. It is this juxtaposition of Seiji and his peers that ultimately bestows meaning to the freeter category in the *dorama*, with the freeter becoming everything the *seishain* (fulltime worker) is not.

Therefore, while in the first instance Seiji's character is depicted as a 'conscientious objector' to ridiculous corporate practices, and as such is exercising his own free will in a reasonable way by taking full responsibility for his actions (*jiko sekinin*), the narrative quickly moves away from social conditions to locate problems with particular elements of Seiji's personality. It should be noted that Seiji, at least in an official sense, has not become a freeter as it is always his intention to find a new fulltime position. In fact the real narrative crisis comes when, after quitting his job at the home goods department store, Seiji becomes a NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training). Much like freeter, NEET as both a policy category and social identity is both internally complex and hotly debated, and as of 2010 there were just under 600 000 NEETs in Japan.⁴⁸ This identity category was constructed as a problem by policy actors in order to produce a rationale for policy intervention, while the social identity of the category, constructed through media discussion, generally labeled NEETs 'lazy and unmotivated'.⁴⁹ Empirical research of this category demonstrates that seniors, females, the less educated and those lacking in work experience are most likely to become NEETS and each of these particular social demographics faces structural difficulties that discourage active participation in the workforce.⁵⁰ However, the normative connotations attached to the social category have tended to render it a problem of deficient individuals, allowing it to be articulated with the clearly derogatory social category '*parasaito shinguru*' (parasite single), a term coined by sociologist Yamada Masahiro in 1999 to describe young people who stay at home and, nominally, live off their parents.⁵¹ Seiji's now complete rejection of working life is rendered a product of his personality, therefore moving the focus away from socio-economic factors and back towards moral characteristics. Seiji himself has become withdrawn and preoccupied and he treats his mother as a live in cook, harshly dismissing her attempts to engage him in conversation and spending his time hiding in his room playing computer games.

⁴⁸ For details see the Wealth, Labour and Welfare Ministry: Kōsei Rōdōshō, 'Wakamono Koyō Kanren Dēta'. Unlike in the UK the NEET category in Japan excludes those searching for work.

⁴⁹ Toivonen, 'Don't let your child become a NEET!', 419. While the left-leaning Asahi Shimbun was more sympathetic to this new social category, Toivonen notes that the lazy and unmotivated connotation is apparent in general everyday contextual use of the term.

⁵⁰ Genda, 'Jobless Youths', 37 - 39.

⁵¹ While Yamada does acknowledge the lack of well paid full time work in Japan, he argues that there are plenty of jobs paying 100,000 yen a month, which should be enough for day-to-day living. For a discussion see Tran, 'Unable or Unwilling to leave the Nest?' See also Hirayama and Ronald, 'Baby-boomers, Baby-busters and the Lost Generation', 338 – 339, who argue that the casualisation of the labour market and the long term recession make living at home with parents economically rational.

If the first component of the middle class precarity constructed in *Furitâ, ie o kau* is the production of a weak (*amai*) son unable to integrate into the workforce, the second is Seiji's mother's depression, which is key in unsettling the stability of Seiji's life. These two elements are then narrated into a cause-effect relationship that, although complicated later on by plot developments, acts as a further indictment of Seiji's character. Up until this point her depression had been hinted at by a repetitive musical phrase and fish-eye camera lens zooming in at a crooked angle, occurring after arguments between Seiji and Seiichi. However, it is Seiji himself who triggers the final breakdown by harshly dismissing his mother's questions about dinner. In the evening Seiji comes down to find his mother crouched in the corner muttering 'sorry, sorry, I wasn't able to die today' over and over. Later, his mother's psychologist notes that family members should always respond clearly to her and through flashback we are again shown Seiji's harsh dismissal of his mother's concerns. Rather than spend time in hospital, Seiji's mother is medicated and placed into the family's care. Through this device Seiji's mother becomes a passive motor that drives the plot forward; her mental destabilization creates the problem for the protagonist to solve. Seiji's mother's depression also marks a breach in the uneasy everyday of the Take family; creating an imbalance in family roles that Seiji is ultimately tasked with redressing.

This problem at the heart of the family also acts to problematise the salaryman / fulltime housewife family structure that provided the ideological bedrock for Japan's post-war development, marking a need to refashion family roles to meet new challenges.⁵² As the story progresses it becomes clear that Seiji's father is incapable of dealing with his wife's condition (at one point he moves out of the family home), one that gained a place in the national consciousness at the turn of the 21st century and as such is particularly associated with post-bubble anxieties.⁵³ Seiji's father thus

⁵² See Dasgupta, 'Emotional Spaces', 375-377 for a discussion of the salaryman / housewife in Japan's post-war economic ideology.

⁵³ This is not to suggest that depression suddenly appeared in the 1990s in Japan, only that it became more significant in the years of economic decline. Reported rates of mental illness in Japan rose from 433,000 cases in 1996 to just over 1,041,000 in 2008. There are more women cases of depression than male, with women making up 63% of all cases in both 1996 and 2008 (274,000 and 655,000 cases respectively). For details see the Wealth, Labour and Welfare Ministry: *Kōsei Rōdōshō*, 'Kanjachōsa'. See Kitanaka, *Depression in Japan* for a historically informed ethnography of Japanese approaches to depression. Mike Mills approaches depression as a lived social identity in his documentary *Does Your Soul Have a Cold?*.

continues to support the family as an economic *daikoku-bashira*, but his inflexibility and absenteeism open up a space for Seiji, representative of the next generation of male workers, to both look after his mother's day-to-day needs and achieve the ultimate goal of moving house. His father, described by the series website as a typical corporate warrior (*tenkeitekina kigyôsenshi*), is therefore rendered anachronistic by his inability to deal with his wife's illness, questioning the particular concept of masculinity he represents.⁵⁴ Therefore *Furûtâ, ie o kau*'s tagline 'Rebuilding the Family' does not denote a return to the original equilibrium, the consensus of the 1960s with its clearly defined gender roles, but a new family dynamic resilient enough to deal with contemporary social and economic conditions.

However some elements of the 1960s consensus remain. Seiji's ultimate goal is to buy a house, and this in effect realigns him with the traditional model of homeownership that was such an important component in the mobilization of the Japanese workforce after WWII. As noted in the previous section, however, it would be unlikely that Seiji the freeter would consider buying a house until he married (and this would be put off due to his job status); while Seiji the NEET would have no need to buy a house at all. Once the prospect of home ownership is discarded, a key justification for participation in the Japanese economy falls away, but with the nature of Seiji's mother's illness and the prescribed treatment, the old goal of homeownership once again becomes a necessity. Finally it is noteworthy that Seiji's relationship with his mother is inverted by the depression, turning him from a recipient of family welfare to a welfare provider. This inversion neatly mirrors social and policy concerns about the role of freeters in Japan's political economy by symbolically representing the structure of welfare provision between the two generations.

Working Class Authenticity and Learning the meaning of Work

Now that (1) the freeter as social category has been identified as a problem (2) identified with Seiji's character and (3) his lifestyle choices have triggered his

⁵⁴ Seiji's father, Seiichi, fits the model of post-war, white-collar salaryman as discussed by Dasgupta, 'The "Lost Decade"'. The instability of this masculine image in post-bubble Japan is in part explored by Seiichi's side plot, which sees him paying the tuition fees of young woman studying to be an accountant. When confronted by his children he says he did this to feel useful. After this confrontation Seiichi starts to cooperate with his family and becomes more involved in taking care of his wife.

mothers depressive episode, the scene is set for Seiji's rehabilitation. From the second episode onwards a complex of social issues surrounding the Take family emerges. Along with the mother's depression, Seiji's father appears to be having an affair with a younger woman, and his sister faces problems related to her position in the neighbourhood as the wife of a doctor, as well as her relationship with her domineering mother-in-law. Later it becomes apparent that the neighbour, Nishimoto, has been bullying Seiji's mother over a long period of time, principally by spreading rumors and tampering with her recycling so that it is consistently returned. Seiji's mother's depression is a result of stress brought on by this protracted bullying campaign, and it is for this reason that Seiji decides he has to save enough money to buy a new home for the family. Through these experiences Seiji develops a new set of justifications for work, as represented by the labourers at his new part-time employer, Ôetsu Construction. As discussed below, the series assembles its own model of life as a labourer which retains elements of the identity structure that are useful in Seiji's development, while discarding, resolving or downplaying elements that remain problematic for Seiji's rehabilitation. This model in essence removes the precarity from labouring in order to use it as an action model for work in Japan's new casualised workforce.

One of the first lessons Seiji learns is that the value of work is not measurable in money terms, but goes on to address both the excitement and stability dimensions of work.⁵⁵ His initial reason for starting at Ôetsu is the high daily wage and when construction is cancelled at the beginning of one workday he asks whether he will still get paid, provoking a rebuke from the Chief. Seiji is then late for work the next day and after being reprimanded he quits. On leaving Manami says that the job is 'not something that just anyone can do', to which Seiji agrees, remarking that it is hard and dirty, but at least the money is good. Manami then replies 'there is more to the job than that' and Seiji 'will find out what that is if he continues'. Seiji, does not quit for long: On seeing his mother carefully ironing his uniform with evident pride he decides to return and is involved in finishing the construction of a road. The work is put off due to rain, however the workers decide of their own volition to wait until the

⁵⁵ This theme is not restricted to *Freeter Ie wo Kau*. Other examples include the character Seno Kazuma's development in the second season of *Hotaru no Hikari* and the above mentioned *Asuko Māchi!* For a discussion of this concept of a problematic Japanese youth preoccupied with money in the context of representations of history and memory at the Yūshūkan museum in Tokyo see Perkins, 'Inheriting the Legacy of the Souls of the War Dead'.

rain finishes so as to complete the road on time. When the storm clears the labourers rush out and, under floodlights, begin working feverishly on the road. To begin with Seiji cannot keep up with the other labourers, and he stops to look around him. Seiji's voice-over remarks on the significance of this event, signaling to the audience that the experience had a part in his changing values:

Everyone is giving their all. They are giving their all to the work in front of them. Just doing their best to finish the road. I wonder what can be at the end of this.⁵⁶

The last 'at the end of this' (*kono saki*) is kept ambiguous by the use of 'this' (*kono*) rather than referring to either the road or the work, however meaning is supplied by the following sequence of events that effectively synthesises the two readings. We see Seiji working alongside the other labourers; a shot of the sun breaking through the clouds; Seiji sleeping in the back of a truck (carried there by the labourers after falling asleep on completion of the road); Manami thanking the Chief for finishing the road, to which he replies 'it is taken for granted that we would meet the deadline. There is no need to thank us'.⁵⁷ It is now that the completed road is revealed, accompanied by the swelling orchestral score that both amplifies and marks the emotional affect of the scene. As they drive down the road in bright sunlight a trumpet takes up the series' musical theme and there is an exchange that fills in the ambiguity left by Seiji's use of 'at the end of this':

Teppei: We made this road.

[Seiji looks back at the road in the bright sunlight]

Tejima: When will this road be put on the map?

Sanada: It will be put on the map when my child is born

Teppei: Can't it be put on sooner?

Tsukamoto: The road is going nowhere. It will always be here.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Episode 2, 40:25 – 40:55.

⁵⁷ Episode 2, 41:24.

⁵⁸ Episode 2, 42:32 – 42:55.

There is then a flashback to Seiji's exchange with Manami referred to above, and then back to Seiji, who smiles to himself as the music reaches crescendo, signifying understanding of Manami's statement that there is more to the job than dirty hard work and good money. Seiji's voice over then states:

No matter how useless I am. No matter how pathetic I am. I wonder if a day will come when I can start over again.⁵⁹

The meaning of the ambiguous 'at the end of this' is determined by the metaphor of the road stretching off into a bright future beyond the storm; a road that has not yet been added to the map, and as such is not fully instituted, but will nevertheless 'always be here'. The road is also articulated with the future, and the potential inherent in future generations by Sanada's comment that it will be put on the map when his child is born. Taken together, the road scene makes a strong case for excitement in work deriving from creation rather than money, as well as putting forward the argument that hard work both figuratively and literally holds the key to the future. Stability derives from giving one's all to the work in front of you, which then produces potential roads to the future; roads that enable the *saisutâto* (second chance) Seiji is seeking.

Lessons concerning stability and fairness are further derived from side plots involving the construction workers, Seiji's love interest Manami, and the secretary Akari, two of which ostensibly address the precarious nature of construction labour in Japan.⁶⁰ The first is taken up via a side plot following another part-time worker at the construction company, the above-mentioned Toyokawa Teppei. The details of Teppei's background are filled out on the website, where we learn that he moved up to Tokyo after graduating high school and was a member of a biker gang before turning his life around, we also learn in passing during the series that the only thing he worries about is what would happen if there was an accident. Although working part-time at the construction company, Teppei is not represented as a freeter. The relational chart that accompanies the series reserves that label for Seiji, with Teppei designated *arubaito* (part-time worker): although under the official government definition, *arubaito* certainly belong to freeter category, Teppei is not labeled as such

⁵⁹ Episode 2, 43:18 – 43:31.

⁶⁰ For an investigation into the life of day labourers, see Gill, *Men of Uncertainty*.

in the *dorama*, much inline with Slater's observations regarding social class as discussed above. He is also in love with Akari, who although seemingly happy at the construction company wants to marry a fulltime employee of a major company. Akari is represented in much the same way as Seiji and her character also functions in Seiji's moral reorientation to work. For example, in a key scene she is redressed in a bar for looking down on the construction workers and when Seiji tries to intervene he is told that he is the same. Teppei's concerns about the future feed into Manami's own side plot, which sees her wrestle with guilt over an accident on her watch as safety officer that left a worker unable to earn a living. Of course, Teppei's initial speculation about an accident invites disaster when at the end of the sixth episode his leg is crushed at work. These two plot lines then address questions of security and fairness in precarious economic conditions.

After being rushed to hospital and regaining consciousness Teppei asks a doctor if he will be able to return to work, saying that 'he has nowhere else to return to'.⁶¹ The doctor's reply is non-committal and Teppei starts to lose hope for the future. This accident pushes the story forward in three ways. It first provides an opportunity for Akari to come to terms with the fact that she is in love with Teppei and so takes her through the same kind of moral reorientation as Seiji in the main plot. However, Teppei himself starts to reject Akari and gives his reasons to Seiji in episode seven:

Teppei: I'm the worst. Without work I can't get married.

Seiji: Eh?

Teppei: I can't be in a relationship with a woman.

Seiji: What are you saying? You've got Akari and there is work...

Teppei: I might not be able to return... Even with rehabilitation I might not be able to do that work. Construction is the only work I can do. If I can't work again I won't be able to make Akari happy. Why did this have to happen?⁶²

Secondly, Teppei's accident creates a crisis for Manami, who blames herself and stops coming to work. Coming to terms with the fact that these accidents happen

⁶¹ Episode 7, 17:08.

⁶² Episode 7, 19:31 – 20:10.

becomes Manami's personal challenge to overcome. Teppei's own experience thus becomes an opportunity for moral growth for two characters rather than a subject fully explored on its own terms. Finally the experience is turned into a more general moral lesson in perhaps the most overtly didactic part of the series. The music in this section is restricted to a simple piano line, which together with the soft focus filter applied to the camera lens, emphasises that this is a significant moment in Seiji's development. Reflecting on Teppei's injury, and with all the construction workers gathered in the office, Seiji asks the head of Ôetsu whether he is scared:

Chief (Ôetsu): You can never know what is going to happen on the site [*genba*].

Seiji: Chief, aren't you afraid?

Chief: I am. Who isn't? But this is our job. We try as hard as we can to prevent accidents, but we needn't worry anymore than is necessary.

Tejima: Its not just people who do our work that are scared.

Tsukamoto: That's true. Doctors are scared of doing dangerous operations that might kill their patients. But they do it anyway.

Sanada: My wife has been pregnant so many times, but she still says it's scary. She could die in childbirth but she faces it anyway.

Chief: We all have our own way of facing our fears. Teppei might be scared of the future. But this is because he feels that this is the only place for him.⁶³

Gill notes that *genba* (site) along with *genkin* (lit. actual/present money) are key words in labourer discourse, 'signifying real work done and real pay received – as opposed to the unreal penpushing work associated with salarymen, rewarded by future bank transfers'.⁶⁴ However the terms also imply transience: 'the workplace is temporary, lasting only until the building is finished, or the worker moves on, and the cash will soon be spent.'⁶⁵ In the above exchange the ambiguous term *genba* (lit. actual/present place) becomes a metaphor for working life in general, with the scene supplying a moral rationale for precarious living.

⁶³ Episode 7, 23:11 – 24:21

⁶⁴ Gill, 'When Pillars Evaporate', 15.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Security, therefore, comes from doing one's best to prevent accidents, but realising that accidents will occur and as such one should not worry any more than is necessary; it is also provided by recognition of the transient nature of work, and the realization that one must always be ready to move on should conditions change. In essence security is dealt with by denying its possibility. A sense of fairness is achieved by placing labourers in the same category as doctors scared to carry out dangerous operations and mothers scared to give birth. Therefore, people at all levels of Japanese society, regardless of social or economic class, are subject to the same set of fears: there is nothing special about the precarity faced by labourers, and by extension provided by the metaphor of the 'site', all those engaged in Japan's workforce. What this statement does is effectively assert that everyone is in the same boat, nothing can be done: Teppei's fears are an unavoidable as part of the natural order of everyday life and thus fair.

The Chief's final proclamation that Teppei is scared because he feels there is nowhere else for him to go implies that Teppei actually does have options, even though it has been established that he has no qualifications, and that his fear is a product of inflexibility and the inability to think of other forms of work. In episode eight, when Manami asks whether Teppei will be all right, Seiji brings the lesson learned through his experience of the road: 'its always possible to start over' (*itsu kara demo saistâto dekiru*); Manami agrees and the problem is effectively resolved for them. And although we see Teppei push Akari away one more time after falling over at the hospital, the plot strand is finally resolved when in the last episode Akari states that she doesn't care about their uncertain future because she loves Teppei.⁶⁶

Manami's own dilemma is resolved tidily later in the same episode when she goes to visit the labourer injured on her watch, and this exchange also makes a point about flexibility. After Manami says that this is the last time she will be visiting he states in a thick countryside accent:⁶⁷

I can't forget that accident. Because of it my family left me and my life is a mess. I wont be able to forget it for the rest of my life. But there is no use

⁶⁶ Teppei appears briefly in the special episode broadcast after the series, where he is working happily at a lunch-box shop, providing evidence for the Chief's certainty that Teppei will find a new place for himself.

⁶⁷ Teppei is also distinguished from the other labourers by his Ōsaka accent.

thinking “I can’t, I can’t.” But then I get a phone call from my wife saying ‘I’ve found work you can do with your leg’. So I am going to go back to her. So you don’t have to visit anymore. Its time to stop blaming yourself.⁶⁸

This side plot is perhaps the closest *Furîtâ, ie o kau* comes to a realistic representation of precarious work in Japan. However, while this exchange does note that the labourer’s life became ‘a mess’ after the accident, his experience is ultimately subordinated to Manami’s personal growth. Two other points can be taken from this scene. As Forrest and Hirayama argue, one of the consequences of neoliberalism, an ideology that stresses self-reliance, has been a greater reliance on family structures and resources,⁶⁹ and like both Teppei and Seiji, the solution to this labourer’s problem is presented as a return to human relationships, specifically the family. These two plots also contribute significantly to the theme of (negative) pride and (positive) flexibility that runs through the series. While we are not told much about why this labourer’s family left him, the reason can be inferred from the fact that he is returning to his wife who has found him a job, that his lack of resilient flexibility caused his hardships. This labourer’s story, then, contributes to the message of the series developed through Seiji’s story: that the current economic climate and its concomitant risks are to be negotiated by flexible workers, who are resilient in the face of uncertainty and supported by their families and friends.

The rest of the series sees Seiji save enough money to move, only for it to be lost to a conman, who tricks his mother into buying a number of good luck charms at exorbitant prices. But then, as shown above, this is entirely consistent with the moral message of the series, which insistently decouples work from monetary value and articulates it with a sense of achievement. On this logic the 1,000,000 yen cannot be the star of the show. Instead Seiji’s final challenge takes the narrative to its logical conclusion. After soliciting his father’s help in preparing his resume and for the interview he is finally offered a job at a prestigious company. However, Seiji also introduces a new accounting system at Ôetsu, and by way of recognition of his development – in the words of the Chief he has now become ‘a dependable person’ – he is offered a fulltime job. The choice is depicted as one between the prestige of a

⁶⁸ Episode 8, 27:45 – 28:44.

⁶⁹ Forrest and Hirayama, ‘The Impact of Neoliberalism on Housing’, 1010.

white-collar salaryman career and a different kind of fulltime position with the construction company. After much consideration Seiji decides to take the job at Ôetsu.

Through this decision the series makes a final point about the sources of action models for navigating Japan's new economy. Although Seiji's father initially sees Seiji's decision as a mistake, he finally visits Ôetsu to thank him for taking on his son. Taken in the context of the narrative up to this point, this scene represents a symbolic transition from white-collar salaryman to construction worker as model of masculinity and self-responsibility in the new Japanese economy, a shift from inflexibility, pride in *position*, expectation and materiality, to idealised flexibility resignation, pride in *achievement*, modesty and humanism. The narrative has seen Seiji take on a spirit of capitalism that finds excitement in creation, security through flexibility and human ties, and fairness in the stoic resignation that everyone, across classes, experiences the same fears, even if they manifest in different ways. With this achieved, and with a little help from his father, Seiji finally fulfills his goal of buying a family home. The house itself is painted in light colours to contrast with the dark interior of the previous home, representing a bright new future for the family.

Conclusion

So what are we to make of *Furûtâ, ie o kau*'s claim to be a 'socially conscious home drama for the 21st century'? In this regard, Katô Taichi, responding to a recent interest in proletarian literature of the 1920s and 30s and especially Kobayashi Takiji's *Kani kôsen* (The Factory Ship, 1929), asks a pertinent question about the representations of working life in contemporary Japan:

So many are suffering because they're poor and each thinks it's *his own fault*... "It's not my fault – it's the social system of the result of politics." How many can step forward and say that? ⁷⁰

While *Furûtâ, ie o kau* bills itself as a 'socially conscious home drama for the 21st century', the preceding analysis demonstrates how the rapid casualisation of the

⁷⁰ Katô is quoted in Bowen-Stuyk, 'Why a Boom in Proletarian Literature in Japan?', 2009.

Japanese workforce is depoliticised, shifting from a set of structural challenges facing Japanese politics, the economy and society, into a moral journey for one middle-class youth. In this, *Furûtâ, ie o kau* fails to provide the sort of vocabulary called for by Katô, instead representing part-time work as a problem of young middle-class men who are unemployed because of their own (poor) decisions and lack the moral training required to find a place in Japan's harsh economic environment. Social consciousness thus becomes social responsibility. Furthermore, those who are more likely to face a precarious future – labourers – are represented as somehow more content with their lives and as guardians of a moral authenticity that the middle-classes have lost. And while the series enters into the lives of these labourers, they play a largely passive role in the development of the middle-class protagonist's work ethic and sense of responsibility to his family. But then, would the reality of precarious life at the *genba* make good television? Noting the labourers' spotless overalls, one day labourer who watched the series comments on his blog: 'asphalt is oil, once it gets on you it wont come off not matter how much you wash it,' before speculating if anyone 'would be happy if you represented that side of things?'⁷¹

Therefore, rather than illuminating and exploring a number of important social and economic challenges currently facing Japanese society, the series is content to tell a story of personal development that falls into sentimentality: maintaining the image of family as the locus of welfare provision and rendering risk a moral challenge to be overcome by resilient individuals, rather than a complex of structural challenges to be addressed by the state. In this sense, the story told by *Furûtâ, ie o kau* is entirely consonant with, and even complimentary to, Japanese state rhetoric extolling the virtues of a self-(state)-responsibility, which has accompanied the uneven and contradictory process of offloading social risk from the state to the individual in contemporary Japan.

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